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Inman: Soviets can't attack by surprise

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AUSTIN, Tex. — The United States shouldn't fear a surprise attack from the Soviet Union, according to the man once considered America's master spy. The rest of the world, he says, poses a greater threat.

U.S. intelligence can detect Soviet military activities, retired Admiral Bobby Ray Inman said during a world peace conference Thursday at the University of Texas. Inman is former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"If you believe the most likely cause of an escalation to nuclear war is a direct strategic exchange with the Soviets, then you can, in fact, relax. That's the one event we're best prepared to detect the preparation of," said Inman, who joined a panel of military experts and political scientists at the conference titled Reducing the Risk of Inadvertent War.

"This country is more capable today than it has ever been in its history to detect and understand the implications of the massing of Soviet forces outside its borders," Inman said.

HOWEVER, THE United States has spent a decade reducing the size of its intelligence staff to help pay for satellites and other technology.

"We paid for them by giving up manpower, giving up people to sort out and make sense of what you collect," Inman said.

That reduction has crippled the intelligence system in such a manner that it will take five to seven years of rebuilding, he said, "before this country has a first-class intelligence system covering the surface of this world."

American intelligence is especially weak in the Third World, Inman said, where the Soviets could capitalize on unstable governments or crises.

THIRD WORLD crises pose the most danger to the United States, he said.

"That is where we stand more chances of a lot more unhappy surprises like Iran," said Inman after his address.

Before his appointment to the CIA, Inman was director of the National Security Agency, which handles the super-secret job of breaking other nations' codes and listening to radio and satellite communications. He was recently named president of Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corp., a Minneapolis research and development company.

Another speaker at the conference, Lt. Gen. William Hillsman, said the country's security communications systems are only as good as the phone company. And the divestiture of American Telephone & Telegraph, he said, could have a profound effect on U.S. security communications.

The U.S. warning system begins with radar tied to the North American Aerospace Defense Command by telephone lines, said Hillsman, director of the Pentagon's Defense Communications Agency.

"Everything we do here in the United States ... in terms of warning and deterrence, is provided to us by the common carrier, by the private sector, the AT&Ts, the GTEs (General Telephone)," said Hillsman, who is in charge of eight government satellites he controls "from the back room of my office five minutes from the Pentagon."